

“Kicks in the Ghoulies” / Time Out / 7 January 1998



They've been called London's real-life 'X Files, and Paul Southcott and Barbara Fennell, investigators of UFO and supernatural phenomena, take their jobs just as seriously as Mulder and Scully. We join them at a pub in Hackney, where strange things are afoot...

(with Alan McEwan)

'I'm the Vinny Jones of the paranormal,' says Paul Southcott, director of investigations for the Ufology and Supernatural Society (USS). 'I get very angry with people who cast doubt on what we're doing. In the past I've even been known to have a pop at people who come along to our talks just to take the piss.'

Tall and wiry, with a Hoxton background and 21 years in the army behind him, few would argue with Paul's convictions- not to his face, at least. He is standing in The Shakespeare, a Stoke Newington pub which has recently been the focus of some major weirdness. Objects have been moving inexplicably, strange noises have been heard in the dead of night and shafts of light without any identifiable source have been seen. The mysterious goings-on have coincided with residents in nearby Shakespeare Walk separately describing the same dreams.

'I never used to believe in ghosts, I thought it was all bollocks,' says Adam Hathaway, laconic landlord of The Shakespeare. 'The USS brought in cameras and measuring devices and got results straight away. Now I'm convinced the place is being haunted.' The nervous look in Hathaway's eyes seems genuine and Sarah Bailey, who lives above the bar, is certainly scared. 'I'm a bit shaky about the whole thing at the moment and haven't been sleeping well,' she says. 'I never used to believe in ghosts but these goings-on have been too strange.'

'We don't believe these particular ghosts- we think there's four of them- are malevolent,' says Barbara Fennell, a former prison warder and now a USS investigator. 'If these were poltergeists they'd be throwing things around. But they seem quite friendly. It's just a bit scary if you don't know what you're up

against. But I don't think the people living here have anything to worry about.'

Southcott and Fennell met at London U.F.O Society (LUFOS) meetings but soon decided that it was a little too stuffy. They created USS to modernise the unusual work. Fennell had joined LUFOS after experiencing the 'mother of all sightings'. 'Two years ago I went to Cornwall with some friends. One evening, while cliff-walking, we saw two amber balls fly across the sky. When we returned to our caravan it was covered in seaweed. After making detailed checks we discovered that no aeroplanes had flown over that night, nor had there been any sea rescues. I'm convinced that the balls were extra terrestrial'. Back at The Shakespeare, the USS leave nothing to chance; they employ the gizmo designed by USS member professor Stephen Clemence to react to changes in electro-magnetic density. If a ghost, or spirit, as they prefer, comes into contact with the gizmo, it screeches like a banshee and flashes its lights. Out come the cameras, thermometers suggest erratic temperatures and USS excitement erupts. The goings on have manifested themselves in three distinct phases.

On the USS's first visit they established that the pub had a great deal of paranormal activity. The gizmo 'went mad', and some of the photographs taken in the bar and upstairs contained irregular bright shapes. The strangest of these was a distinctly face- like shape, floating about head height beside the jukebox. They also caught what Hathaway described as a 'floating head' on video in a cupboard upstairs. The USS were thrilled, yet suspected they had only scratched the surface. On another occasion, their equipment reacted so powerfully and frequently that even Fennell confessed to being frightened. At one point, a heavy steel table jumped an inch into the air. Gradually, a slightly unpleasant edge was manifesting itself: it had been thought that the spirits were harmless, but recently this cosy notion has been threatened by feelings of intimidation. They are easy to scoff at in the light of the afternoon bar, but darkness puts a new complexion on things. In order to investigate further, the USS recently staged a night- long vigil at the pub. As we speak, Southcott hopefully waves the Gizmo around. 'It was really making some funny noises the other night,' he reports.

Both Southcott and Fennell dismiss suggestions that they are Hackney's answer to Mulder and Scully. Nevertheless, they have been the target of plenty of media attention, most of which they find insulting. 'We turned down The Guardian and Jonathan Ross,' says Fennell, 'because we knew they were just going

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to take the piss.’ As we are talking, a south London press agency rings to ask him to embellish the story of ghastly apparitions at The Shakespeare in return for financial reward. ‘Once we start down that road, we get into the same kind of trouble as other UFO organisations. The temptation to Adiscover@ things where they don't exist will become too strong. I get very angry when people try to manipulate the truth in that way! I'd rather be broke than compromise,’ he says.

Southcott reserves particular scorn for a recent local-paper front page devoted to The Shakespeare haunting. Though the piece itself was fine, a photograph of Hathaway and Fennell standing outside the pub was tampered with, an unconvincing ghostly presence added, floating over their heads. ‘That sort of thing makes us a laughing stock,’ fumes Fennell. ‘We don't have any need to tamper with film, we have enough real evidence. We gave them loads of Polaroids we took here, but they didn't use any of them.’ Southcott produces a series of pictures for our inspection. ‘The thing is with Polaroids, you can't doctor them,’ says Fennell. ‘Some of these we took ourselves, some were left to go off automatically. None of these things were visible when the picture was taken.’

The pictures, some of which appear to show faces, others clouds of smoke, may not be enough on their own to convince a cynic. But as neither Southcott nor Fennell seems to be making any money, and neither have any strong religious beliefs, it is hard to see why they would want to fabricate evidence. ‘We are very serious about our work,’ says Fennell. ‘We don't get funding from anybody because we don't want to be compromised. We're both single parents yet we make a promise that if people approach us with genuine worries about something they believe has happened we will go anywhere in the UK to investigate. We've been as far as North Wales to look at a UFO case. To those who need us we are the only emergency service. I must stress that we're extremely cynical ourselves about most sightings. I personally believe that 99.9 per cent of UFO sightings can be easily explained. On the other hand, some sightings are genuine mysteries.’

As the millennium approaches, interest in paranormal activity has intensified. Could the reason be a yearning for some kind of meaning in a post-religious world? ‘Groups like Heaven's Gate (the Californian UFO cult which committed suicide last year) and stuff, that's just really sad,’ says Fennell. ‘That's just basically a load of mixed up people who lost touch with reality. A lot of these people who claim to see or experience things are in fact on drugs.

Neither Paul nor myself ever touches them.’

This leads to a discussion on what ghosts actually are. Fennell goes more for the idea they are a form of energy, whereas Paul believes they are ‘recordings’. ‘It's now thought that crazy things like walls can actually soak up noise and light,’ says Paul. ‘There was this pub where they put devices to the walls, and heard the sounds of the pub from hundreds of years ago. Perhaps that's why it's so often pubs that are seen as haunted, simply because they're so old.’ Which leads us to a possible explanation for the ghostly goings-on in Shakespeare Walk.

According to the USS, the area was once the site of a plague pit which they believe is the reason for the local's recurring dreams. ‘Five separate people have come forward to us with the same dream since we came here,’ says Southcott. So, what the dream was about? ‘Death,’ he says. Meanwhile, Adam is wondering how the spirits are going to be evicted from his pub. Southcott and Fennell have several suggestions, including bringing in a medium and exorcist (though how an atheist exorcism would work is a real mystery)

Southcott and Fennell seem happiest with the notion that the ghosts should just be left in peace. We are invited to another all-night vigil, but later the offer is withdrawn; Hathaway, the publican, has become suspicious that it could just be an excuse for a ‘lock-in’. As consolation, Southcott and Fennell invite us to another all-night investigation, at a small village in Kent. ‘You'd better dress warm,’ says Southcott, ‘You'll be in the back on a pick-up truck.’ His eyes gleam with zeal at what seems to be a military-style operation, though Fennell complains the trips are usually just an excuse for too much beer. As we leave the pub, Southcott is waving his Gizmo around with a frown on his face.

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